HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

Session 1 April 2017

"Clean Clothes Vs. Clean Water," Hoosier Women and the Rise of Ecological Consumption

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Mrs. Robert Kilkenny stood outside the entrance to her local Indianapolis grocery store on April 23, 1970 with a band of other housewives and college students. They represented no formal group, but recently united to achieve one common goal: to encourage housewives to stop using high phosphate laundry detergents, which polluted waterways. As morning shoppers busily hurried around them, Mrs. Kilkenny and her recruits passed out handbills listing the phosphate content in the laundry detergents that lined grocery store shelves. They hoped they could encourage other women to become environmentally conscious consumers and stop buying products, like phosphate detergents, that polluted the natural environment. Women could mobilize, flex their power as consumers and improve the quality of air, water, and their natural surroundings. Women's actions encouraged Indiana legislators to enact the nation's first statewide ban in 1971 on the sale and use of phosphate detergents to improve the quality of North American lakes, thus requiring all consumers to use non-phosphate detergents instead.

Before the ban could take place, concerns broke nationwide over the health, safety and cleaning effectiveness of the new non-phosphate detergents consumers would soon be forced to use. In response, professional home economists in Indiana urged housewives to lobby for a repeal of the ban, and recommend enhanced sewage treatment plants as an alternate method to reduce phosphorus in

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¹ Mary Ann Butters, "Citizens Seek Cleaner Soap," *Indianapolis Star*, April 24, 1970.

waterways. This paper investigates how white, middle-class Hoosier housewives, like Mrs. Kilkenny, influenced the debate between male politicians and professionals over whether Indiana's ban on phosphate detergents should be repealed or retained from 1973-1974. As women sifted through conflicting information regarding detergents and water quality, their opinions and their private laundry practices became highly publicized in conversations grappling with environmental regulation, technology, health, and hygiene.

Mrs. Kilkenny and her cohorts acted during a period of environmental consciousness in North America that inspired them to support pollution control. Post World War II affluence spurred a wide range of social changes that increased white, middle-class Americans' contact with nature. They now had the means to visit lakes or state parks and move away from polluted cities to the suburbs where clean water and air were abundant. As primary household consumers, women in particular became increasingly aware that their new affluent lifestyles, fueled by factories and enhanced by new consumer goods, also polluted the land, water, and air surrounding them. "Popular ecology," the notion that human actions disrupted the natural world and a resulting desire to bring the two in balance, was born. Women, like Mrs. Kilkenny, began lobbying for initiatives to clean up their natural surroundings, launching the American environmental movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s.²

Women, especially white, middle class women who had extensive leisure time, played an extremely active role in the environmental movement as volunteers, lobbyists, and organizers.³ Histories of the environmental movement, especially those focused on pollution of the Great Lakes, have glossed over women's activism. Instead male scientists, politicians, and government employees take center stage. While such studies offer necessary insight into governmental regulation of water quality, they obscure the perspectives of consumers and caretakers (mainly women) who bought and used phosphate detergents or pushed for environmentally friendly alternatives.⁴ An in depth study of women's reactions

² Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States 1955-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 25-30.

³ Adam Rome, "Give Earth a Chance: The Environmental Movement and the 1960s," *The Journal of American History* Vol. 90 No. 2 (2003): 536-540.

⁴ For examples of gender and the history of the environmental movement, see "'Give Earth a Chance'; The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," *The Journal of American History* vol. 90, no. 2 (2003): 525-554; "Gender and Place: Women and Environmentalism," in *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington DC: Island Press, 2005), 275-304. Comprehensive works on phosphate pollution of the Great Lakes, see Terence Kehoe, *Cleaning Up the Great Lakes: From Cooperation to Confrontation* (Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1997), which focuses on pollution in the Great Lakes to illustrate the transition of environmental regulation from the local to federal level in the United States and William

to the phosphate ban in Indiana, the first state to enact such a ban, reveals the complex decisions women had to make regarding health, hygiene, and water pollution.

The Great Lakes, like many North American waterways, had become polluted through industrial, agricultural and human wastes during the 20th century. However, during the 1960s, scientific evidence emerged that pinned increased pollution on one consumer product, phosphate detergent. Phosphate detergents, developed during World War II, gained broad market acceptance in the postwar era because they cleaned much more effectively than regular soap. Increased amounts of phosphate from laundry detergent eventually made its way down the drain, through sewers, and finally into lakes. The phosphorus acted as a fertilizer for aquatic plants, such as algae, and caused it to grow out of control. This made the water green, slimy, smelly and less habitable for fish. This process is called "eutrophication," jargon primarily limnologists (fresh water scientists) knew until the late 1960s, when public concern rose about the stinking state of the Great Lakes. Eutrophication occurs naturally over thousands of years as a lake ages into a swamp or wetland. However, human activity accelerated this process from thousands of years to mere decades.⁵

Canada and the United States began thinking about combatting eutrophication by financing enhanced sewage treatment, encouraging industry to develop non-phosphate detergents, and banning phosphate detergents. Non-phosphate detergents would improve the issue immediately until better sewage treatment plants could be developed, financed, and built to filter out phosphates and other nutrients. Once federal governments became concerned, national media sources began printing stories exposing Great Lakes pollution. Though eutrophication afflicted other lakes, the Great Lakes became the poster child for the cause as the largest set of fresh water lakes in the world. *Life* featured a 13 page expose on the lakes in 1968. Filled with colorful photographs of green waters topped with detergent

McGucken, *Lake Erie Rehabilitated: Controlling Cultural Eutrophication*, 1960s-1990s (Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 2000). McGucken picks up where Kehoe left off by extending the story of phosphate pollution of Lake Erie into the 1990s and including the Canadian perspective.

⁵ Terence Kehoe, "Merchants of Pollution?: The Soap and Detergent Industry and the Fight to Restore Great Lakes Water Quality, 1965-1972," *Environmental History Review* vol. 16, no. 3 (1992), 24.

⁶ Philip Scarpino, "Addressing Cross-border Pollution of the Great Lakes after World War Two: The Canada-Ontario Agreement and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement," in Michael Behiels and Michael Stuart, eds., *Transnationalism in Canada-United States History into the Twenty First Century* (City Needed Here: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 117-120; McGucken, *Lake Erie Rehabilitated*, 98-99.

foam residue, shorelines piled up with litter, and blossoming algae blooms, the story illustrated the depth of pollution in the Great Lakes Basin to the public. *The New York Times, Time,* and *Consumer Reports* likewise published sweeping, frightening reports on the consequences of detergent use in 1970.

Hoosier women started participating in these national discussions regarding water pollution and phosphate detergents. In particular, they debated actions consumers could take to improve water quality and the broader environment. On April 24, 1970, the *Indianapolis Star* reported that dozens of women and university students united temporarily to encourage housewives to stop using high phosphate laundry detergents. The participants stood outside grocery stores throughout Indianapolis and passed out handbills to morning shoppers that listed the phosphate content in the laundry detergents for sale. It was only after a trip to Toronto that Mrs. Robert Kilkenny, the organizer of the group, became inspired to advocate for home use of non-phosphate detergents. Mrs. Kilkenny said, "Canadian women have proven that if they really want to do something about this problem, they really can. The housewives there aren't buying these detergents anymore." Women like Mrs. Kilkenny became so active in Indiana that Marsh supermarkets in the state announced they were starting a new program to help housewives "choose between clean water and clean laundry." Signage would mark the quantity of phosphate in every detergent so women could buy one with lower amounts of phosphate.

Women took similar action in other areas of the United States and Canada. As both nations debated instituting nation-wide bans on phosphate detergents, new non-phosphate detergents began to appear on the market in May 1970. Their brand names often promoted their new, environmentally friendly status like Valley Dew, Nature & Concern, Stream Fresh, the Un-Polluter, and Phosph-Free. Advertisements also used text and imagery to suggest it was white middle-class housewives who bore the responsibility of cleaning up waterways through buying and using non-phosphate detergent. For example, an advertisement for Sears Non-Polluting Laundry Detergent featured a drawing of a white housewife standing triumphantly over a box of detergent, holding freshly laundered clothes over her head. Bold, black text behind her read "The Clean-Up Committee." Smaller text below stated "Detergent phosphates are stagnating America's water supply. Now you can do something about it with Sears new phosphate-free detergent." The first advertisement for the Un-Polluter in the *New York Times* featured reviews from local housewives praising the detergent's cleaning ability and gushing about their new power to do their "bit to

⁷ George Thomas, "Grocery Chain Acts in Pollution Controversy," *The Republic* December 12, 1970; "Phosphate Quantity To Be Told," *Indianapolis Star*, December 8, 1970.

help the pollution problem," with this new product.8

Legislators in the Indiana General Assembly took advantage of their constituents' increased awareness of phosphate detergent's polluting effects. B. Patrick Bauer of South Bend took up the charge and introduced HB 1551 during the 1971 legislative session that made it unlawful to "use, sell or otherwise dispose of" phosphate detergents after January 1, 1973. Governor Whitcomb signed it into law in April, 1971 making Indiana the first state to ban phosphate detergents. Legislators hoped their actions would encourage other states and eventually the nation to pass phosphate detergent bans to improve water quality.

However, the phosphate ban came in to question in August of 1971 when the death of a young girl in Connecticut became a focal point of the debate. Newspapers reported that one day, a busy housewife ran out of laundry detergent and borrowed a cup from her neighbor. Unaware that it was a non-phosphate detergent, she got distracted and set the cup down. Her young daughter found the cup, drank some of the detergent in it and later died. This highly-reported incident occurred amidst new studies released by the FDA that some non-phosphate detergents, which contained nitrilotriacetic acid (NTA) as a replacement for phosphate, might break down into cancer-causing substances. Some studies indicated NTA was caustic and could harm skin and eyes if direct contact was made. The following month, the US Surgeon General Jesse L. Seinfeld reversed the federal government's support of non-phosphate detergent and recommended in a press conference that housewives return to using phosphate detergents. ¹⁰

In light of the controversy, the Indiana phosphate ban became a controversial topic, but Hoosier legislators decided to keep it in the books. Reporters made sure to contact local housewives to see how they felt about the ban once it started January 1, 1973. A week after the ban started, an article in the *Pharos Tribune* of Logansport, Indiana described women "staring at strange-looking boxes with strange-sounding names, trying to find another laundry detergent," who desperately wanted their phosphate detergents back. However, reporters at *The Anderson Daily Bulletin* of found that, on the whole, women were still willing to give up their phosphate detergents to improve water quality. Marjorie Shell, of

⁸ Advertisement: Sears Non-Polluting Laundry Detergent," *Boston Globe* January 10, 1971; Advertisement: The Un-Polluter, *The New York Times*, May 26, 1971.

⁹ State of Indiana. *Indiana Code*, Public Law No. 174, 689-690.

¹⁰ McGucken, *Lake Erie Rehabilitated*, 170-173.

¹¹ Levenda Smith, "Women Prefer Clean Clothes to Clean Water," *Pharos Tribune and Press*, January 7, 1973.

Frankton said "I'm not worried about losing my detergent. All we have to do is look at the White River and see it's necessary." *The Daily Reporter* in Greenfield noted that local housewives were divided on the issue. Some had been buying up stocks of phosphate detergents. Mrs. Arthur Estes, of Ingalls, who worried non-phosphate detergents would not work well, thought the ban would mean "a lot of dirty people." ¹²

As consumers surveyed the changing landscape of their detergent aisle, various groups began to push for a repeal of the ban. Professional home economists in the state had the most influence on housewives' decision. Home economists had long served as professional mediators between American housewives and male businessmen, scientists, and engineers, to teach the latter what housewives wanted and needed. They also worked as county "home demonstration agents" to teach local housewives about new household technology and best practices to save time and energy. By the 1960s, second wave feminism criticized white women's seclusion in the private sphere as mothers, homemakers, and caretakers and thus placed the field of home economics under scrutiny. However, home economists' image as experts of consumer products for nearly 50 years solidified their power to influence the phosphate detergent debate. ¹³

Home economists at Purdue University expressed initial concern about a phosphate ban in late 1970. Hoosier home economists were by no means anti-environment: the Annual Homemakers Conference Purdue sponsored had offered sessions like "The Status of Women and Pollution," and "Perspective on Pollution," in 1971, "Poplin, Polyester, and Pollution," in 1972, and "Plants and Flowers-Indoors and Out," in 1973. They understood that phosphates in detergents contributed to eutrophication, but thought that the government needed to consider other input sources such as agriculture and industry instead of dumping the entire clean-up burden on the home consumer. Home economists advocated enhancing sewage treatment instead of banning phosphate detergents to clean up waterways. However, sewage treatment plants took time and lots of money to build. In late 1972, President Nixon impounded

¹² Connie Staton, "Housewives Apparent Apathy over new non-phosphate law may result in troublesome, in adequate laundry products," *Anderson Daily Bulletin* December 18, 1972; "Grocers Say Most Unaware of Law," *The Daily Reporter*, December 30, 1972.

¹³ Carolyn M Goldstein, *Creating Consumers: Home Economists in Twentieth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 1-10.

¹⁴ Annual Homemakers Conference 1971, 1972, 1973 binders, Health and Human Services Extension Administration, Addition 1, Box 1, Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana; "Pollution Due to Phosphates?" *Indianapolis Star*, December 13, 1970.

the money allocated in the recently passed Clean Water Act to fund sewage treatment plants across the nation, making construction of these plants even more costly.

Home economists at Ball State University also began a campaign against the ban. They publicized the results of their own in house tests that compared non-phosphate and phosphate detergents in Indiana newspapers. In December 1972, right before the new ban on phosphate detergents went into effect, they mailed out a packet called "The Phosphate Facts," to 3,000 Ball State home economics alumni about the phosphate ban. The opening letter stated that the committee members felt "that home economists have a responsibility to be informed about the issue and to be active in disseminating information to Indiana homemakers." It noted that "extensive research" showed that non-phosphate detergents were caustic and toxic, reduced the flame retardant properties of children's garments required to be present by law, corroded laundry equipment, and had less effective cleaning power than phosphate detergents.¹⁵

Though the committee mailed the packet to trained home economists, they chose not to furnish any results from the studies they had conducted. The department preferred to provide a series of quotes from mostly male scientists and engineers, studies completed by the Soap and Detergent Association, washing machine manufacturers, and other similar companies, to support their thesis that housewives should reject non-phosphate detergents. However, and the committee didn't include their own studies, it is important to note the committee assembled the packet to encourage housewives to "study the enclosed material," and then to voice their concern to local state legislators. The packet represented the information the committee felt would be persuasive not only to housewives, but also to the mostly male state legislators that housewives would contact. Quotes from male scientists and industry representatives would be easy for housewives to pluck from the packet and place right into their letters or read off during a phone conversation with a representative. Also, the committee members may have understood that male legislators would take the viewpoints of male scientists and industry representatives more seriously in an age when women's professional roles in science and technology were so tenuous.

The actions of the Indiana Izaak Walton League, a highly publicized conservation organization

¹⁵ To Alumnae from Phosphate Study Committee, December 22, 1972, Charles Wise Papers, MSS.230, Phosphate Documents, Box 2, Folder 55, Ball State University Archives and Special Collections, Muncie, Indiana.

¹⁶ "Are We Concerned," Charles Wise Papers, MSS.230, Phosphate Documents, Box 2, Folder 55, Ball State University Archives and Special Collections, Muncie, Indiana.

dedicated to keeping the phosphate ban, attests to how influential home economists were. In response to their "Phosphate Facts" mailing the league created its own mailing packet to send to Ball State University home economics alumni to supposedly provide "a more balanced and objective discussion." The league hoped alumni who were "fair, reasonable, and well-educated" would enjoy hearing the other side of the debate, "even if it means reconsideration of original conclusions." The packet encouraged readers to call or write to their state representatives and senators, "urging support for Indiana's landmark phosphate detergent control law," after analyzing the facts presented. ¹⁷ The league also helped enlist the endorsements of two established, well-respected women's organizations, the Indiana League of Women Voters and the Indiana Division of the American Association of University Women. The league hoped that these organizations' support for the phosphate ban would prove "market acceptability and effectiveness" of non-phosphate detergents to worried female consumers. ¹⁸

The League of Women Voters endorsement was particularly helpful. League of Women Voters groups in the Great Lakes region had been particularly active fighting Great Lakes pollution since the 1950s. ¹⁹ Traditionally, the league engaged in extensive, careful research on every topic before starting any educational and lobbying campaigns. As part of their research, Indianapolis league members evaluated waste treatment plants and interviewed local water pollution and sewage treatment experts. ²⁰ The League created a handout for all members, "Why the League of Women Voters Supports the Phosphate Ban," in 1974 that neatly summarized their research and findings. The handout cited state tests of several Indiana lakes and streams that proved since the ban, phosphorus levels in raw sewage had been reduced by 60%. They cited studies conducted by the EPA, *Consumer Reports*, and the FDA to demonstrate non-phosphate detergents were safe and effective cleaners. ²¹ In their 1974 annual report Indiana League Environmental Quality chairwoman Becky Meier described the importance of the League's work in retaining the phosphate ban. She attested that according to one senator the fact the league had "taken a

¹⁷ Izaak Walton League, "The Phosphorus Issue," February 16, 1973, Charles Wise Papers, MSS.230, Phosphate Documents, Box 2, Folder 55, Ball State University Archives and Special Collections, Muncie, Indiana; Izzak Walton League to Indiana State Senators, January 26, 1974, Charles Wise Papers, MSS.230, Phosphate Documents, Box 2, Folder 57, Ball State University Archives and Special Collections, Muncie, Indiana.

¹⁸ Izzak Walton League to Indiana State Senators, January 26, 1974, Charles Wise Papers, MSS.230, Phosphate Documents, Box 2, Folder 57, Ball State University Archives and Special Collections, Muncie, Indiana.

¹⁹ Terrianne K. Schulte, "Grassroots at the Water's Edge: The League of Women Voters and the Struggle to Save Lake Erie, 1956-1970" (PhD Dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2006).

²⁰ Indianapolis League of Women Voters, *Annual Report 1971*, "Environmental Quality Committee," 22, League of Women Voters of Indianapolis Records, 1915-1986, M 0611 Indiana Historical Society, Box 4, Folder 3.

²¹ Indianapolis League of Women Voters, "Why the League of Women Voters Supports the Phosphate Ban," League of Women Voters of Indianapolis Records, 1915-1986, M 0611 Indiana Historical Society, Box 20, Folder 9.

position on the basis of the evidence of phosphate reduction was very impressive. We were widely quoted, our press release was picked up and reused."²²

Though many Hoosier women participated in political discussions centered on the phosphate ban through established organizations, like the state home economics associations or the League of Women Voters, others found new platforms to express their opinions. The Indiana Senate Environmental and Ecology Committee held hearings in Indianapolis, Fort Wayne, and Bloomington to hear citizen opinions about the phosphate ban in February 1973. Housewives representing both sides of the debate turned up at the hearings to let legislators know their views. Many hauled in their freshly washed laundry as evidence to show how well the non-phosphate detergents worked. Mrs. Robert C. Glazier, of Mooresville brought in a load of her family wash, which had been laundered for several years using non-phosphate detergent. Glazier told the committee, "The propaganda from the companies that non-phosphates do not work is just not true. There has been no residue, no deterioration of the fabric, and the washing machine has worked without trouble." Mrs. Eugene E. Levitt, an Indianapolis mother of five, testified that nonphosphate detergents caused no issues for her at the Indianapolis hearing. She encouraged legislators to keep the ban because it had "raised the prestige of the state. We are a leader." On the other hand, Mrs. Barbara Reed, a coin laundry operator from DeMotte emphasized her customers had been complaining about non-phosphate detergents. She testified, "My customers definitely want their phosphate soaps back-non-phosphates aren't as effective."²³

Other women wrote editorials or letters to politicians. Some signed petitions and other lobbying literature to send to the Indiana General Assembly. Mrs. Nancy Chapman, a Fort Wayne housewife collected 1,500 signatures from area women in support of retaining the ban. A group called the Citizens Committee for Clean Water and Clean Laundry partnered with the FMC group, a manufacturer of phosphates, to organize a mass mailing campaign. FMC provided the funds, while the women in the committee mailed postcards urging the repeal of the phosphate ban to Indiana legislators and Hoosier citizens. Lorene Skunk, a trained home economist who headed the committee, and her colleagues got

²² League of Women Voters of Indiana, "Part G: Environmental Quality," *Indiana Annual Report*, 1973-1974, 10 Indiana Historical Society, M 0611 League of Women Voters of Indiana Records, 1908-2004, M 0612, Indiana Historical Society Box 16, Folder 1.

²³ Bruce C. Smith, "Housewives Praise Nonphosphates at Hearing," *Indianapolis Star*, February 6, 1973; Virginia Graham, "Phosphate Ban to Remain, Special Uses Exempted," *Indianapolis Star*, March 7, 1973.

15,478 women to sign cards.²⁴

The media and ecology conscious politicians took unprecedented steps to ascertain housewives' opinions about the phosphate ban. The *Indianapolis Star, The Muncie Evening Press,* WOWO radio station in Fort Wayne, and the *Kokomo Tribune* all conducted either written or phone surveys of Indiana women in particular, to uncover how many were in support of the ban and against it. Indiana politicians seemed keen to understand women's opinions as well. The Indiana Republican State Central Committee sent out the results of the WOWO survey to republicans in the Senate. Governor Bowen wrote a letter to a Mrs. Freda Reardon, who had written to him expressing her support for the phosphate ban in December 1972. Bowen thanked Mrs. Reardon for sharing her opinion and noted, "I am waiting to find out from a good many of women who are at the present time experimenting with the non-phosphate detergents to see how they actually work." A Citizen Smith comic *Indianapolis Star* employee Dave Gerard created implies the importance women's opinions began to hold. A man wearing a graying shirt walks out his front door, presumably on the way to work. His wife stands in the door way and yells at him "Don't let them kid you about your tattle-tale gray shirt! Throw out your chest and tell 'em your wife doesn't use phosphate!" 25

Women used the phosphate debate to engage in discussions that had statewide and national significance regarding environmental regulation, sewage treatment and hygiene. Their opinions and experiences in the laundry room became an important part of political discourse in the state about how best to regulate waterways. In 1975, the state biologist testified before the General Assembly that the phosphate ban worked. He cited a State Board of Health study of 27 Indiana lakes and that found phosphorus levels had been lowered significantly in 25 of them. Today, approximately 25 states have followed Indiana's precedent and enacted some sort of phosphate restriction on laundry detergents. Indiana still implements a phosphate ban; only detergents containing 0.5% phosphate or less are allowed. The EPA's website under the Obama administration noted nutrient pollution (eutrophication), remains

²⁴ Dale Burgess, "Phosphate Repeal Vote Defeated," *Brazil Daily Times*, March 26, 1973; "Garton Questions Threat," *The Republic,* February 6, 1974

²⁵ "Straw Vote," *Indianapolis Star*, March 18, 1973; "Phosphate Forum," *Muncie Evening Press*, January 8, 1973; "Housewives Report on Use of Non-Phosphates," *Kokomo Tribune*, March 1, 1973; David Gerard, "Citizen Smith," *Indianapolis Star*, March 31 1973; "Survey on Laundry Detergents." Democratic Politics Bayh Notices, Box 079, Lugar Collection. University of Indianapolis Digital Mayoral Archives; John A. Garrett to Republican Speaker, April 19, 1973." Democratic Politics Bayh Notices, Box 079, Lugar Collection. University of Indianapolis Digital Mayoral Archives; Governor Otis Bowen to Mrs. Freda Reardon, January 2, 1973, Governor Bowen Papers, 44-Z-1, folder 17, Indiana State Archives, Indianapolis IN.

"one of America's most widespread, costly, and challenging environmental problems," and notes that certain detergents and soaps used in the home can contribute, and recommends Americans use phosphate free detergents. Women's work debating clean clothes vs. clean water during the 1970s remains an overlooked example of how women carved out ways to influence environmental regulation and participate in larger discussions regarding science, technology, and health.²⁶

²⁶ Hortense Myers, "House Votes to Repeal Phosphate Ban," *Jasper Herald*, January 16, 1974; "Water Clean Up Reported," *Anderson Herald Bulletin*, February 19, 1975. Worldwide Cleaning Industry Association. ISSA State Phosphate Survey (Lincolnwood, Illinois: January 2013), accessed